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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the question of introducing a critical pedagogy of representation into the art classroom, what it means and how it works. A critical pedagogy of representation holds socially transformatoryugoals that work toward a critical democracy. The approach affords opportunity for oppositional readings of texts and images by opening up new ways to speak of those representations, by questioning assumptions, and by problematizing the work within political, social, and cultural aspects of production and reception. Such critique of popular culture becomes an overt politicization of works of art and popular culture, giving rise to a politicized art education, and forcing transformation in society. The paper describes the origins of radical and critical pedagogy and comments on how the approach can be used in introductory university art education classes. (EH)

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Interpreting Works of Art Using a Critical Pedagogy of Representation.

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Interpreting Works of Art using a Critical Pedagogy of Representation

What does introducing a critical pedagogy of representation into the art classroom mean and how does it work? A critical pedagogy of representation, under the umbrella of critical pedagogy, holds socially transformatory goals that work toward a more critical democracy. A critical pedagogy of representation affords opportunity for oppositional readings of texts and images by opening up new ways to speak of those representations, by questioning assumptions, and by problematizing the work within political, social, and cultural aspects of production and reception (Giroux, 1992, p. 219). Such critique of representations becomes an overt politicization of works of art and the imagery of popular culture, and gives rise to a politicized art education. In this way, a politicized art education can be a force to help transform society.

Grounded in history, a critical pedagogy of representation is a contextually-based approach for reading imagery and in the art classroom students question and problematize meanings within and surrounding works of art. In this cultural studies approach to art education, particular representations, whether works of art, television, advertising and other printed matter, or texts and imagery from popular culture, afford opportunities for comparison, contrast, dialogue and debate. Students question in Roger Simon's terms "why things are the way they are and how they got to be that way" (Simon, 1988, p. 1) as they gain knowledge that contributes to their own production of identity and formation of subjectivity. The study of social and political issues as class, race, gender, difference, diversity, multiculturalism, popular culture, and issues of education and schooling, among others, opens avenues for the creation of

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personal artworks. Students make connections between works of art and their own personal life experiences and events for a richer, in-depth look at self and society.

For example, by juxtaposing Faith Ringgold's *Tar Beach* with Jacob Lawrence's *Daybreak a Time of Rest*, developing dialogue around the theme of "flight to freedom," and problematizing the historical and cultural conditions within the contexts of the works, students can engage in-depth discussions of issues of racism, classism, and feminism. By choosing works of art that lend themselves to problematizing content, educators rely on the content of the works of art to give rise to questions and incite dialogue in the classroom around topics that deal with the production of knowledge, power, domination, and freedom of ideas.

Origins of a radical or critical pedagogy

Emerging in the early 1980s, the theoretical origins of Henry Giroux's (1983) "resistance pedagogy" proposed a politics of hope and possibility for cultural workers seeking transformation of society. This critical pedagogy was the vehicle for progressive, reconstructionst or radical ideologies that offered a means to balance the conservatism and hegemony of a powerful elite. Challenging conservatism, Giroux (1983) pulled from the perspectives of Gramsci, Marcuse, Adorno, and others, and like Spring (1994) and Chomsky (1988), pointed out a shift in the locus of domination in advanced industrial countries of the West,

> from a reliance upon force (police, army, etc.) to the use of a cultural apparatus which promotes consensus through the reproduction and distribution of dominant systems of beliefs and attitudes. Gramsci called this form of control ideological hegemony, a form of control that not only

> manipulated consciousness but also saturated the daily routines and practices that guided everyday behavior. (Giroux, 1988, p. 76)

What happens to the arts given this ideological manipulation of culture without benefit of critical challenge? In Hitler's Germany, the arts were smothered because of their power to question and challenge hegemony. More recently in the United States, conservative forces dismantled the majority of public funding for the National Endowment for the Arts. Might the power of the arts, including art education, be a force that a hegemonic power structure cannot tolerate because of the extent that it can critique aspects of culture that are oppressive? Further why does a society accept this hegemonic muscle-flexing from people who are not only ignorant about art but who use that power to manipulate citizens toward a contrived political agenda? A critical pedagogy explores such ideas and does not refrain from a questioning, critical stance.

Ira Shor and Paulo Freire on pedagogy

Shor and Freire (1987), based on Freire's (1970/1992) liberatory pedagogy, discussed pedagogy for change as it relates to the production of new knowledge and the knowing or perception of existing knowledge. Within a transmission pedagogy, the act of knowing is merely a transference of existing knowledge from learned instructor to student. It is an hierarchical discourse which begins with the teacher's voice followed by questions directed by/to the expert. Freire (1970/1992) termed this concept "banking education" in which the teacher makes the deposits and the student records that deposit in the form of tests. Students become spaces for marketing knowledge.

Within transformation pedagogies (such as liberatory, critical, feminist, or cultural, and some semiotic pedagogies) lie possibilities for skepticism and

scrutiny by students who are curious, critical, and creative (Shor and Freire, 1987, p. 7-8). Critical education integrates students and teachers into a mutual creation and re-creation of knowledge. Critical education dispels myths such as value-free learning, learning posed as free of ideology or politics as purported by many schools and colleges particularly in science, engineering, technology, and business schools, and some social sciences, among others (Shor and Freire, 1987, p. 12). In value-free learning, students are taught to leave out the politics of judgment and merely describe from a scientifically neutral and objective stance. Imbued with Kant and DeCarte to Darwin, science came to speak as truth. Technique is emphasized, not critical contact with reality (Shor and Freire, 1987, p. 12) Anything that smacks of the critical or political is missing, hence reality becomes deceived.

To break the bonds of rational acriticality, Freire showed how methods of a dialogical, liberating education can draw us into the "intimacy of society". "Through critical dialogue about a text (which is also a work of art) or a moment of society, we try to reveal it, unveil it, see its reasons for being like it is, to see the political and historical context of the material" (Shor and Freire, 1987, p. 13). Learning for social transformation maintains a critical perspective of school and society. Through human consciousness, we learn how we are conditioned by dominant ideologies. We gain distance from our moment of existence. We learn to be free through political struggles. As Friere, stated, "We struggle to become free precisely because we can know we are not free!" (Shor and Freire, 1987, p. 13); thus, we can become transformative. The opposite of consciousness is uncritical immersion in the status quo without awareness, without working toward change for a better society, and without providing a balance to the status quo.

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The authoritarian state

Like Freire and Shor, Spring (1994) wrote of ways that the power elite maintains control of the masses. In an authoritarian state people must develop a willingness to sacrifice for the common good. An authoritarian state is designed to fit people for particular places in the social order, and for them to accept an assigned social position with differences between social classes as good and just (Spring, p. 15). Who decides what the common good is and what role the educational system plays in maintaining the common good?

Philosophers such as Plato and Makarenko wanted a particular type of person to emerge from the educational system" (Spring, p. 14). Plato wanted a personality in which wisdom used spirit to control desires, while Makarenko wanted a socialist personality in which individual desires were inseparable from the needs of the collective. In both cases, individual personality was developed, (one might say cultivated) to meet the needs of the state (Spring, p. 14). Spring maintained "the authoritarian state is interested in people accepting and internalizing the laws of the state as being good and right" (Spring, p.14). "Creating . . . emotional attachments to the will of the authoritarian state requires censorship and manipulation of history. Within education the content of instruction is censored so that the information given to the student conforms to the dictates of the state. . . .Historical instruction aids in the development of patriotism and willingness to sacrifice for the common good" (Spring, pp. 14-15). The content of textbooks is a classic example of such endoctrination even in the United States that is reported in insurgent texts as *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong* (Loewen, 1995).

John Dewey in *Experience and Education* (1938) questioned, "Just what is the role of teachers and of books in promoting the educational development of the immature?" His reply reads, "[a]dmit that traditional education employed

as the subject-matter for studying facts and ideas is so bound up with the past as to give little help in dealing with the issues of the present and future" (pp. 22-23). Was Dewey correct? What role do textbooks, standardized curriculum content, and resultant testing play in status quo endoctrination of the masses? Are curriculum and testing used as a means of societal construction of knowledge and ways of being that demand questioning by a critical democratic populace? To Spring "standardized tests are used to measure a person's abilites and interests as a means of determining her or his place in the social order. Of course, this requires educating people to believe that standardized tests are fair and just even though they might be designed to show the inferiority of most people to the rulers" (1994, p. 15). According to Gould (1981) in *The Mismeasure of Man*, intelligence testing served unjust purposes in the early 20th century when people were told that higher test scores insured a biological predisposition to higher potential and intelligence. What harm accompanies such erroneous scientific research? In this case, the research was used as a cultural apparatus to insure white Euro-supremacy. Spring wrote, "The educational system of an authoritarian state wants to produce common citizens who are willing to die to protect the very state and social system that condemn them to a life of slavery and exploitation" (1994, p. 15). Who then were/are the exploited? Does the power structure of the United States government use control tactics of an authoritarian state despite its guise of freedoms?

The historical origins of Jeffersonian democracy in this nation resembled a selected leadership like that of philosopher-kings rather than what most of us presume to be origins of a more egalitarian, critical democracy. Jefferson's proposals for education of the elite resembled that of Socrates. Socrates contrived myths to reduce social discontent and justify the power of the rulers. One such myth is the myth of the metals in which rulers convinced people of

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their place in society as a result of their inherent qualities. Rulers were gold, guardian soldiers were silver, while farmers and workers were composed of iron and brass. Hereditary characteristics were deemed best when each metal bred with a like metal (Spring, 1994, p. 7). Control of the masses resulted. Socrates thought it justifiable for philosopher-kings to lie to the masses for the common good, but not permissable for lesser others to lie (Spring, 1994, p. 6).

As myths give way to ideologies, ideologies become engrained in the fabric of a culture as norms. By looking to history, a critical educator can/must consistently question education's purposes and intent and what many consider the norms of educational endeavor in order to maintain that criticality. For a critical democracy to exist, it is imperative that issues of power, acquisition of knowledge, and control of ideas be consistently questioned.

On ideology, education, and social movements

On a cautionary note Shor (Shor and Freire, 1987) stated when you "challenge the existing ideology, you are swimming against the current, revealing what the culture keeps hidden, and you have to expect some 'heat.' The risk of punishment restrains many teachers. You're on safer ground if you join the club and just [use] the official knowledge" (p. 44). However, if safety were the primary interest, then many social movements would have failed miserably. So decisions must be made by each of us teachers and educators as to the importance we place on being a radical educator or a "transformative intellectual" in Giroux's (1988) terms.

Why and how does one become a radical educator? The decision may be based on one's philosophy of education, its perceived purposes and functions, the extent to which one is immersed in and values dominant ideologies, and the flexibility and willingness to adapt a stance to politicize

education, whether subtly or more overtly. Whatever the choices, teachers need to be aware of the risks involved in being a radical educator. Many school systems, and yes, even universities, shy away from words that smack of radical or critical because they are so frightened of or immersed in the status quo they cannot perceive any benefits to providing a balance in the form of historical/cultural critique. Anything termed radical or critical may be viewed as an attack that can damage "progress" or "excellence," to use the familiar jargon of education. So educators/teachers must first do historical/contextual research and reading to find out the rest of the story, as it were. In practicing a critical pedagogy, one may need to tread softly, learn the political score, and proceed with awareness given the confines under which one works, realizing that ideological challenges to culturally conditioned attitudes, beliefs and values within school and community, even those that work against that school and community, may not be welcomed with open arms. Even Freire stated that he made "some concessions to old learning habits, to reduce the level of resistance and anxiety" (1987, p. 11).

Working toward a radical pedagogy in art education

What kind of methodologies might work best in a critical pedagogy? Shor speaks of using parallel pedagogies where the teacher simultaneously employs a variety of classroom formats. If the dynamic, problem-posing lecture coexists with student participation and presentation, group work in class, individual work, writing sessions, field work outside class, and other cooperative endeavors, the form of the course itself will reduce the threat of teacher-talk in a transference-of-knowledge lecture or transmission pedagogy. A radically democratic and responsible teacher directs the process (not students) and is not doing something <u>to</u> the students but <u>with</u> the students (Shor and Freire,

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1987, p. 46). Critical activists in teaching and elsewhere in society self-examine practices, as Shor stated, "not accepting ourselves as finished, [but] reinventing ourselves as we reinvent society" (Shor and Freire, p. 50). Therefore teacher and student are co-participants in learning.

With preservice teachers in an introductory university art education class, I devised methods to employ a critical pedagogy and a critical pedagogy of representation. Some students are very accepting of this type of pedagogy and others are antagonized by factors that thwarted expectations and hence challenged socially constructed attitudes, values, and beliefs about art education and life. As an example of one semester's endeavor, preservice teachers participated in a game-like activity, "iconography in a [plastic] baggie," (Guay, 1994, Kent State University, personal observation) that effectively concretized for the student the meaning of metaphor and iconography. Student's collected several metaphoric items that represented self. Responses included: 1) erasers for erasing life's daily mistakes, 2) a lollipop for being a "sucker" in relationships and life in general, 3) a roll of tape for times when one is torn and needing to be put back together, 4) an adapter to make self more flexible in various circumstances, 5) a battery for rejuvenation at the end of a long semester, and 6) a measuring tape for accuracy. Realizing the semiotic nature of metaphoric imagery, students completed a homework assignment of several sketches using iconography in/as a self-portrait. The purpose of this assignment was to instill an appreciation for the depth of thought necessary in creating metaphoric quality in works of art and how artists of merit consistently work toward that richness in their works. Students learned how interpretations are formed from signs and sign meanings that directly reveal self in society, and that works of art are imbued with metaphoric resonances that reveal ourselves to ourselves in a multiplicity of ways.

In the next session students examined works by Frida Kahlo, particularly her self portraits focusing on *On the Border Between the United States and Mexico*, 1938, read against Leonora Carrington's *Self-Portrait*, 1938. One goal was to create in students an awareness of issues of feminism as these women artists made the personal political and became role models for women's empowerment. Both Kahlo and Carrington challenged female objectification within psychological aspects of the gaze. Both works reflect duality of a female self in society. While Carrington's work focused on confinement in a patriarchal world, Kahlo portrayed herself trapped on a border in relationship to the colonization of Mexico by the United States at the expense of Mexico's economic interests and environmental concerns. Kahlo in her journals termed this action as "the big fish taking from the little fish." From this study, students developed connections and questions concerning current United States relations with Mexico pointing out inequalities wrought by greedy capitalists, and thereby, exmined their own complicity in such actions. The works were rich with potential dialogue on feminism, colonialism, racism, classism, elitism, and ethnicity among others.

Based on Brent Wilson's comprehensive, historical/contextual-based methods of visual and verbal interpretations of works of art (1992, class notes), students wrote a response paragraph jotting down initially perceived meaning of the Kahlo work. Participating in an inquiry session lead by the instructor, students formed interpretations of the work with the addition of information by critics and historians about Kahlo and Carrington's body of works. Students compared and contrasted Carrington's work in order to enhance the meaning of the Kahlo work and provide a broader thematic perspective concerning "duality of self in society." Based on contexts taken from Panofsky's (1955) iconology (political, social, technological, philosophical, religious, psychological, and

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contexts), we completed a group webbing on the chalkboard of Kahlo's *On the Border* while simultaneously working on individual context sheets. As a homework assignment, student's used all information available to write a one-page interpretation of the Kahlo work while comparing and contrasting Carrington's work. Students used metopher, analogy, simile or other descriptive language modeled after the manner of Walter Pater's poetic interpretation of Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* read in class. And to learn more about self, students completed a context sheet on themselves to reveal more of their own lived experience.

For the visual interpretation of the work, students learned color theory, experimented with mixing colors, worked on painting techniques, completed a painted self-portrait from earlier homework sketches, and wrote an interpretation of their personal work making connections and devising relationships among the ideas pulled from Kahlo's and Carrington's works to their own work. Students evaluated each other's artworks based on criteria set for expressive quality, ideational content, contextual information, meaning, and craftship, and finally shared the ideas and content of their works with peers. In some classes the works were distributed to various groups and the students, acting as critics, had to relay the meanings in the works to the rest of the class. This game-like activity was well-received by most students as they found they could deciper plausible meaning of peer work based on what they had learned about reading professional works. The meanings within the Kahlo and Carrington works lent themselves amicably to cultural critique, and students readily perceived those meanings given an abundance of questions that led them, cajoled them, and challenged them to consider the "whys" surrounding the creation and interpretation of the works. I chose to model works richly imbued with socio-political issues that could be problematized within

contemporary cultural contexts. Student works dealt with topics such as the effect of advertising imagery on women's subjectivity, the sometimes hegemonic role of religion in personal life, the chaos and alienation of separated families, and the disempowerment of youth, among others. These topics were thematically and conceptually related to the model works rather than mirroring content.

In art education curriculums devised by teachers as intellectuals, particular representations can be made problematic for the ways they afford opportunity for dialogue and debate on issues that affect student's lives. This instrumentalist type of art teaching requires risk taking in support of a transformative, critical-thinking activist population. Radical pedagogies are as necessary in art education as in general education. Radical pedagogies critique culture and encourage citizens to maintain a balance of power. Radical pedagogies raise a voice for those who are oppressed. Radical pedagogies create citizens who are aware, caring, and knowledgable about life within a democratic society and the world. Working toward meaningful and insightful visual and verbal interpretations of works of art, and problematizing works within historical/cultural contexts within a critical pedagogy of representation supports a politicized art education as a force for critical democratic citizenship that consistently questions, "How free are we?"

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